DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 171 130 FL 010 307

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TITLE Getting What You Want in a New Language: The Acquisition and Use of English Directives by Non-Native Speakers.
PUB DATE Oct 78
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Los Angeles Second Language Research Forum (2nd, Los Angeles, California, October, 1978).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Language; Communication Skills; *Communicative Competence (Languages); *English (Second Language); Language Development; Language Patterns; Language Processing; *Language Proficiency; *Language Research; Language Skills; *Language Styles; Language Usage; Native Speakers; Non English Speaking; *Second Language Learning; *Speech Communication; Speech Skills; Transfer of Training
IDENTIFIERS Speech Acts

ABSTRACT

It is possible to communicate effectively in a second language in spite of highly deviant pronunciation and grammar as long as messages are semantically coherent and message forms are reasonably appropriate. Until now, research in second language acquisition has focused principally on the processes through which non-native speakers move towards native-like grammatical competence. However, there has been little study about how and why non-native speakers learn to say what is appropriate and socially correct in their new language and speech community. The present study is concerned with the insights that the theory of speech acts can contribute to our view of second language acquisition by examining the use of English directives by non-native speakers. Data sources include questionnaires given to speakers of English in service encounters, journals, and interviews. Because social blunders are considered embarrassing, excuses for them are often offered rather than explanations, although mother tongue interference is considered at times. The data gathered for this study indicate that transfer is not the only factor that accounts for differences between native and non-native use of directives. Learning and communication strategies similar to those identified for the acquisition of grammatical competence are at work in the development of communicative competence as well, and individual second language learners vary considerably in the strategies they use. (Author/AMH)

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Getting what you want in a new language: the acquisition and use of English directives by non-native speakers

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Presented at the Second Annual Los Angeles Second Language Research Forum, October 6-8, 1978, University of Southern California

In the current issue of Human Nature, Jerome Bruner argues that mother tongue acquisition should be looked at not as a solo flight by the child in search of disembodied rules of grammar, but as a problem-solving transaction. The essential problems to be solved by mother and infant have to do with "how to make our intentions known to others, how to communicate what we have in our consciousness, what we want done in our behalf, how we wish to relate to others, and what in this or other worlds is possible." (Bruner 1978) In this paper I will look at L2 acquisition with the same perspective advocated by Bruner for L1 acquisition, focussing on the development of communicative rather than grammatical competence. I will be concerned with the insights that the theory of speech acts can contribute to our view of L2 acquisition. First, I would like to discuss some aspects of speech act theory which seem to offer ways of classifying and analyzing L2 data and suggest some questions to be investigated. Second, I will describe some research methods which may provide some answers to the questions raised. Finally, I will present some research results and some conclusions, which are at this point quite preliminary and tentative but, I hope, interesting.

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Following Searle (1965, 1969, 1975, 1976), I will take speech acts to be the minimal units of linguistic communication, specified in terms of speaker intentions or illocutionary point. A great number of speech acts may be recognized (Austin 1962), but several taxonomies are available for classifying speech acts into a small number of basic types (Searle 1976, Fraser 1975). Directives are one such basic speech act type. The class of directives includes all speech acts whose point is that they count as attempts on the part of the speaker to get the hearer

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to do something. Orders, requests and desperate pleas are all directives, although they differ along several dimensions.

In addition to the illocutionary point or "essential condition" of a speech act, there are a number of other conditions which are necessary for a particular act to be performed. For requests, the most important conditions which have been identified by Searle (1969) are as follows:

Propositional content:	Future act (A) of hearer (H)
Preparatory conditions:	H is able to do A. S(peaker) believes H is able to do A.
	It is not obvious to both S and H that H will do A in the normal course of events of his own accord.
Sincerity condition:	S wants H to do A.
Essential condition:	Counts as an attempt to get H to do A.

Note that it is generally out of order to request something that the speaker believes the hearer unable to do, or to request something that the hearer is going to do anyway. If a conference chairperson asks speakers to keep their presentations within the established time limit, we make sense of the utterance by assuming that unless such a request were made speakers might very well run overtime.

The most important controversy in the linguistic discussion of speech acts has to do with whether illocutionary point is part of the "meaning" of a sentence and whether and how that aspect of meaning ought to be represented in the grammar of a language. In traditional school grammars of English, there is an assumed fit between sentence type and illocutionary point, to wit: declarative sentences (a grammatical category) are used for making assertions (a speech act category); imperatives are used for orders; interrogatives are used for questions. The performative analysis is essentially an attempt to capture this relationship, by positing for all imperative sentences, for example, a highest performative clause "I order you" in the deep structure.

The syntactic arguments for and against the performative analysis are outside the scope of this paper (see Ross 1970; Matthews 1972 for some opposing positions),

but on semantic and pragmatic grounds the performative analysis --in its simplest form-- will not take us very far in understanding the relationship between linguistic form and illocutionary point. The fit between sentence type and communicative function is only typical, not absolute. Declarative sentences are not always assertions, but can function as questions when the hearer rather than the speaker is assumed to have knowledge about the proposition (Labov 1972), or as orders ("No one will leave the room, and that means you!"). Syntactic imperatives are not always orders, e.g. in a sentence like "Spare the rod and spoil the child."

Sadock (1970) first tackled the problem of a class of sentences he called "whimperatives," sentences which have question form but directive force, e.g. "Will you close the door, please?" Sadock analyzed such constructions as conjunctions of questions and imperatives. Other analyses are possible. Whimperatives could be analyzed as identical in deep structure to imperatives (Heringer 1972). One could claim that forms like "Will you shut up?" start out as simple imperatives, to which tags are added and then preposed (Green 1975).

A different approach to the analysis of whimperatives and other indirect speech acts has been proposed by Gordon and Lakoff (1971). Following Grice (1968, 1975), they argue that sentence may convey more than their (literal) meaning, and that speakers and hearers interpret such sentences by reference to conversational postulates. Whimperatives are to be analyzed grammatically as simple questions, but are interpreted by speakers and hearers as directives by means of an entailment rule which states that requests can be conveyed by either asserting the speaker-based sincerity condition of the speech act or questioning one of the hearer-based preparatory conditions. This simple but elegant rule accounts for such forms as "I'd like you to go now," "Could you be a little quieter?," and "Well, are you going to help me?" One can also convey requests obliquely by simply refering to conditions which make it reasonable for a speaker to want the action ("I'm hungry") or to conditions which make it reasonable to expect that the hearer can do the action,

e.g. "Ah... while you're up." As Clark and Clark (1977) have pointed out, it is an extraordinary correspondence when speakers make indirect requests by making linguistic use of the social conventions that cover requesting.

Ervin-Tripp (1976) has proposed a strikingly different analysis of English directives. Ervin-Tripp argues that social factors determine the choice of directive type. Directive forms such as need-statements ("I need a match;" "I'll have a Burgie"), imperatives ("Excuse me") and elliptical imperatives ("Coffee, black"), permission-directives ("Can I have my records back?"), non-explicit question-directives ("Gotta match?"), and hints ("The matches are all gone") correlate with such social variables as age, rank, familiarity, presence of outsiders, the seriousness of the service requested, territorial location. Moreover, Ervin-Tripp claims that directives do not require inference from literal interpretations (via conversational postulates) to be understood. When speakers and hearers share knowledge of obligations and prohibitions, simple interpretation rules are sufficient for prompt understanding.

For the purpose of investigating speech acts in the context of language learning, one of the most important questions to be asked is whether or not the various aspects of requesting described for English are universal. Gordon and Lakoff report that they have checked with speakers of widely divergent languages and would not be surprised to find that the conversational postulates they propose are universals. Fraser (1978) has recently claimed that the strategies for performing illocutionary acts are essentially the same across languages and that acquiring social competence in a second language does not involve substantially new concepts concerning what types of devices serve what social functions. There is sufficient evidence to argue, however, that request strategies will be found to be universal only if they are phrased in extremely general terms. While it is <u>perhaps</u> the case that one can make a request in any language through some reference to the hearer's ability to perform the act, exact translations of English sentences often fail to carry identical implied force. Searle (1975) points out that the sentence "Can you hand me that book?"

can be translated literally into Czech, but the resulting sentence will sound extremely odd to a Czech speaker if uttered as a request. English can, could and able when indicating requests can only be translated into Cantonese with a modal that does not mean specifically physical ability. If the wrong modal is used, can-directives may be answered with "yes" or "no," with no action (Lee Marcus, personal communication). Green (1975) reports that conditional forms equivalent to English would ("Would you leave it on my desk when you're finished, please?") cannct carry imperative force in Spanish, Hebrew or Japanese, though they can in English, German and Finnish. In English, we can convey directive force with non-literal let's (teacher to students: "Now let's all think before we raise our hands"), but Cole (1975) reports that in both Swahili and Yiddish non-literal let's constructions are ungrammatical.

Searle has argued that the mechanisms or strategies for indirect speech are general, but within this framework certain standard forms tend to become conventionally established. Standard forms for one language may not maintain their indirect speech act potential when translated into another language because the translation may not be idiomatic in the L2 and/or may not be the form conventionally selected in the L2. So even if all strategies for performing directives are ultimately shown to be universal, learner's of new languages still need to learn at least two things: the conventionalized or ritualized forms of the L2 and a large set of new social conventions or ritual constraints (Goffman 1976) for their use.

Even within one language community, different speech communities may use different conventionalized forms, and even minor differences in the conventionalized forms may produce strong affects. In Hawaii, an ESL teacher recently complained that her immigrant students were extremely rude. What made her really incensed was that students would frequently demand assistance by saying, "Teacher, try come hea." But the teacher, who has not been in Hawaii long, simply did not understand the use of try-directives in Hawaiian Creole English. In Standard English, try-directives are appropriate if the task is difficult or if the beneficiary of the act is the

hearer rather than the speaker (i.e. in suggestions rather than requests). If the task is for the benefit of the speaker and easy to perform, sarcasm is conveyed. But in Hawaiian Creole English, "try" is simply a conventionalized, polite request form, used without restrictions based on task difficulty. Within the HCE community, then, the teacher was the foreigner and the immigrant students were the "regulars," those who know the standards of a place (Jakobovits and Gordon 1976-77).

In order to investigate differences between native and non-native use of English directives and the paths that non-native speakers follow in making the transition from foreigner to regular, a variety of methodological approaches might be used. I will discuss here only those approaches which I have tried myself. None of these have been either experimental or controlled cross-sectional studies. Except for the first method, all involve observing adults being themselves in the world. I will report along the way what I believe to be the major strengths and weaknesses of each approach, together with the information that each has yielded.

In order to supplement statements in the literature about the universality of strategies for directives, I have interviewed informants who speak some twenty different languages, asking them to tell me which request forms are possible and which impossible intheir languages. While some of the reports obtained are very interesting, I am very skeptical of the validity or usefulness of this approach. For specific languages, inter-informant agreement has been low. Informants are all too ready to provide overly vague accounts of what is possible,based on the global notion of politeness. This is likely to be misleading, given that detailed accounts of directive usage in English by Ervin-Tripp and in Japanese by Neustupny (1972) have shown that politeness is neither sufficient nor even perhaps necessary as an explanatory principle for the distribution of forms. Informants are generally unable to distinguish between "impossible" and "unlikely for most contexts" when asked to evaluate forms. These problems are similar to the problems of eliciting grammaticality and acceptability judgments from naive native speakers when dealing with sentence

level grammar, but are even more severe when dealing with the use of sentences for social purposes. The questions which I and other researchers would like to answer using this approach would be better served by detailed ethnographic accounts of a wide variety of speech communities (Cf. Goody 1978).

Susan Asada and I have used an observational technique that is useful for contrasting the ways in which directives are used by different speech communities in similar settings. We recorded all instances of directives issued by bilingual faculty members in English and Japanese to departmental secretaries in the Department of East Asian Languages at the University of Hawaii over a six hour period. Although want and need-directives are possible in Japanese (R. Inouye, personal communication), Asada and I found that these were not used in a setting in which they were frequent in English. Asada's explanation is that this is due to a cultural value of de-emphasizing individual will (Asada 1977). We did not find that native speakers of English used need-statements when speaking Japanese in this setting, nor did native speakers of Japanese avoid them when speaking English. This suggests that transfer of norms was not a factor, but it must be noted that all these speakers were highly proficient bilinguals.

Information about native and non-native use of English directives in a wider variety of settings might be obtained by rapid anonymous observations in places where native speakers and non-native speakers both can be expected to make frequent requests. Together with my students, I have done this in such settings as library reference desks, lunch counters and bus information booths. Gross differences between native and non-native use of directives can be observed in this way, such as the inability of most non-native speakers to hedge their directives in the ways that native speakers do (see Dunkel, this conference, for a detailed report of this phenomenon observed in role-playing sessions), but there is a major weakness to the method. When speech act errors or misunderstandings are observed, it is frequently impossible to determine the source of error. Witness the following exchange:

setting: airline office

Salesclerk 1: But Korean Airlines won't endorse the ticket, I don't think.
Salesclerk 2: You can call them and ask. (Looking directly at customer)
NNS Customer: OK, would you phone and ask?

In this case, a salesclerk who was not herself waiting on the customer turned in her direction and suggested that calling Korean Airlines would be better than walking to the office (as suggested by Salesclerk 1), but the customer deflected the suggestion to the salesclerk who had been waiting on her. However, I cannot tell whether the non-native speaker failed to understand what was said and what was meant, or simply pretended not to understand, using the same ploy often used by skilled native speakers in similar contexts.

Only occasionally is it possible to obtain explanations for what is observed in this way. Not long ago, outside a university cafeteria, I was approached by a lost looking foreign student. "Do you have change for a dollar?," he asked. I didn't, but feeling helpful suggested that he go inside with me and I would get change from the cashier. Standing in line, I asked him if he was studying at the university for the summer. "Uh... Japan," he answered. "What are you studying?," I asked. "Yes." His comprehension was close to zero. I sat drinking my coffee for a while, reflecting on his perfect command of the request formula (excellent phonology) and practically nothing else, pondering the implications for this paper. When I left the cafeteria, I met an English instructor, who told me that he was enjoying the first week of the summer session and that the students from his beginning level class were at that moment going around the campus driving everyone crazy asking for change. The students had practiced their dialogue all morning before going out to baffle an innocent researcher.

Some of the weaknesses of rapid observations can be circumvented by the close study of individuals or small groups of individuals over a period of time. The data and analyses with which I will conclude come from journals kept by native speakers of English who have systematically reported the directives used by non-native spouses or roommates over a period of several months. The native speakers also took notes on the contexts of utterances and reported their reactions to the

directives used. I later interviewed both parties about what they thought was going on.

NNS to son: So after supper you will do your homework.
To spouse: Tomorrow we will go to see the movie, alright?

Even given that husbands and wives who speak the same language are often at odds over the choice of directive forms used in the family, something more appears to be going on here. The first sentence, addressed to the NNS's son, would be perfectly appropriate if homework were an issue in the family. However, it is not, and the NNS reports that he meant to suggest and did not intend to be or sound imperious. The native speaking spouse suggested that in both these examples can, or even better, c'n, would have been a better choice of modal to convey the reported intentions of the speaker. But this NNS never uses can when reference is to future time, even though this is possible in the native language. He was taught that it is extremely important to indicate time reference in English, and he was taught (contrary to fact) that uncontracted forms are always more polite and proper than contracted forms.

In general this speaker pays careful attention to literal meanings. The relationship between his forms and his social meanings could be defined in terms of conversational postulates, though the details of the rules for use of these postulates would differ somewhat from those of a native speaker. This speaker contrasts in many ways with the L2 learner represented by the following examples:

setting: fast food restaurant

NNS: Ah, I have a Big Mac, n I have a french fries, small, and a Coke ... that's all.
NNS: Can I have a banana spi..lit, please?

This non-native speaker, a native speaker of Japanese learning English entirely from informal contexts, uses a wide variety of directive forms which are for the most part sensitively matched to appropriate contexts. His pragmatic and social skills in the use of English are considerably in advance of his grammatical competence.

This speaker relies heavily on the use of formulaic speech, unanalyzed chunks of language, in ways similar to the Spanish speaking children whose acquisition of English has been documented by Fillmore (1976). In the first example the formula is completely appropriate, but distorted in a way that suggests that there has been no analysis into the literal meaning "I will have." Inferences via conversational postulates are not the explanation here; rather, surface forms are being directly matched to settings.

However, other directives produced by the same speaker do not use formulae, but indicate that directives are being generated using the grammatical rules of the interlanguage and knowledge about what relationships can hold between form and function.

c.NS: D'ya want some more Coke?
NNS: No... I'm n want some more coffee... please OK?

d.NNS: 'ts OK... n maybe betta first go to Shinji's place, and I want and take back here n go to dinner, because tomorrow n Wayne he's workin' in the morning and seven o'clock.

gloss: So why don't we go to Shinji's place first and then afterwards come back here and go to dinner, because tomorrow Wayne has to work at seven.

e.NNS: Please n you takin' dis suitcase.

f.NNS: Please ... never thinking.

gloss: Don't think about it.

These directives are not based just on ways of talking in Japanese. Note the want-directives in examples (c) and (d). Want-directives are possible but rare in this speaker's Japanese, but widely used as a strategy for his English requests. Except in formulaic expressions, especially obscene idioms, imperatives, as in (e) and (f) are generated with <u>-ing</u> forms. Imperatives also often include an explicit subject "you," specifying agency, and preposed "please."

"Please" presents some problems of interpretation in L2 directives. In our rapid anonymous observations, one of the more consistent findings was that NNS's use "please" more than do NS's. There could be many explanations for this. Since

the sample was heavily biased towards speakers of Asian languages, who have a reputation for being polite, this could be simply a transfer of ways of speaking. We know that "please" occurs frequently in textbooks, so transfer of training is a possible explanation. The interactions we observed were between strangers, so "please"could be a marker of unfamiliarity. Or "please" could be acting as a disambiguator, making it clear that a request is being made. This is one of the primary functions of "please" in adult native English.

In the case of this L2 learner, based on an examination of a larger corpus, "please" appears to serve at least three functions. In (b), "please" is a polite tag used with unfamiliars in routine transactions. The preposed "please" of (e) and (f), on the other hand, represents a communication strategy both to disambiguate and to establish the sincerity of the request. Disambiguation is necessary because in this speaker's interlanguage there is no consistent bare imperative form available to distinguish imperatives from declaratives. Sincerity is indicated by the fact that preposed"please" occurs when the task is difficult or when the speaker really cares about the request.

In Bruner's characterization of the early request forms of L1 learners, the initial tasks are establishing sincerity and agency. This speaker is attempting to solve the same problems children face, so the fact that he uses "please" more than adult native speakers could be seen as a developmental phenomenon. But this speaker is using adult forms to solve these problems; "please" is not a feature of children's first requests! In other cases, his requesting strategies are not childlike at all.

h.NNS: This is all garbage.
gloss: Put it out.

i.NNS: Ah... Jerry, I have two shirt upstairs.
gloss: Get them while you're up there.

Examples (h) and (i) are hints, directives which do not explicitly name either the action to be performed or the intended agent. Reviewing studies by Halliday (1975), Bates (1976), Dore (1975) and Garvey (1975) on early English request forms,

Ervin-Tripp (1977) concludes that the major difference between adults and young children is that "wide use of tactful deviousness is late accomplishment." Hints are commonplace among the utterances produced by this L2 speaker, perhaps reflecting their common occurrence in Japanese.

The conclusions I wish to draw are only two, and they are routine in the study of L2 acquisition from the grammatical perspective. I find strong parallels in the development of communicative competence. First, some but not all differences between native and non-native use of English directives are due to transfer of ways of talking. Transfer of training, the use of speech formulas and strategies of learning and communication are at work as well. Second, there are striking differences among L2 learners in the ways they approach the problem of expressing their intentions in the new language.

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